

NOT THE RIGHTEOUS!

ADAPTED FROM PACIFIC GARDEN MISSION'S RADIO SERIES, "UNSHACKLED!"

by Jack Odell

"For I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" Matthew 9:13

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Chapter 7

Alice Parsons . . . who smiled only once

LOUISE HALL'S STORY WAS DRAMATIZED ON "UNSHACKLED," and that broadcast brought her a blind date. Nothing romantic, but a frightening appointment with a correspondent who described herself as, "a rude, unhappy, sinful old woman."

The people whose stories are broadcast often get letters from listeners. Some are merely expressions of good will. Others ask for advice or prayer. This letter was in a class by itself. Something in the story of Louise's transformation from a bitter, aggressive, hard-talking fighter - against - the world to a calm and dedicated servant of CHRIST had reached out with a strange appeal to the crabbed old woman, Alice Parsons. But it took Louise many uncomfortable months to discover what that "something" was.

Waiting now on the Harrison Street platform of the Chicago subway, Louise re-read the old woman's letter.

". . . I did not even want to listen to your story on the radio. But since I did listen, I find myself hoping that you will write . . . and I might . . . talk with you face to face."

Louise knew it wasn't for her to choose how the Lord might use her and the broadcast. She had answered the letter, and by mail they had agreed to attend the service at Pacific Garden Mission. The meeting place was to be the subway station.

Waiting in the dank, echoing tunnel, Louise knew she was actually afraid; afraid to meet this self-described, "rude, sinful old woman." While she prayed for poise, a train thundered in and squealed to a stop. Louise tried to get out of the way of the crowd pouring past her. Moving aside, she bumped into a tall, grim-looking woman with a set, motionless face.

They stared at each other for a moment. Every hard line in the gaunt, bony face said something repellent - something Louise wanted to run from! She turned and took three quick steps away, stopped, tried to collect herself - and then turned back.

She tried to smile as she said, "I hope you don't think I'm rude, but I'm supposed to meet someone on the station platform and . . ."

The woman answered coldly. "I'm Alice Parsons."

They stood for a moment; two tall women. Then Louise took Alice Parsons' arm and they climbed the long stairs to the street above. The subway exit is less than a block from the Pacific Garden Mission. When they reached the surface, Alice Parsons spoke in a level, grating voice.

"I wish you'd let go of my arm, Mrs. Hall."

"Oh, I'm sorry." Louise was embarrassed. "I didn't. .."

"It's all right," the old woman snapped. "I just don't like people to touch me."

"I understand."

"I doubt if you do. But that's the way I am."

During the Mission service, it was hard to know what Alice Parsons was thinking. For Louise it was pure agony.

When she held a songbook for them to share, the old woman looked away. When she held it for herself alone, she caught Mrs. Parsons watching to see if she meant to share it.

During the invitation, Louise asked if she wanted to accept CHRIST. The lined face hardened. "I've had enough of this, Mrs. Hall .. Let's go."

That was their meeting.

At home, Louise asked the Lord what it was all about. She prayed, "Lord, I'm willing to have You use me in any way You want."

Willing to go ahead until every door was shut, she wrote a note to her strange acquaintance. An answer came at once. That called for a reply and thus started a clumsy, limping correspondence that went on for months. Alice Parsons always wrote coldly, and Louise wished more than once the whole business might end. But Muriel, Louise's teen-age daughter, was deeply interested.

Louise had asked for the old woman's telephone number.

The reply was a flat refusal, and this puzzled Muriel even more than it did her mother.

"Why, mother? Why do you suppose she won't give her number?"

"I don't know, Muriel. I don't understand her at all!"

"But why did GOD trust her to you in the first place?"

Louise shook her head. "I've wondered the same thing.

I wish I could turn her over to someone who could really help. But she won't talk to anyone

else."

Time passed and they grew no closer. There was not a hint of why Mrs. Parsons had made that first overture, yet she still wouldn't drop Louise. Once or twice they met for dinner in a restaurant. One night, as they parted, the old woman seemed to thaw a little.

She said, "I've had a nice evening, Mrs. Hall."

"I'm glad," answered Louise. "So have I."

"You don't need to say that." Alice Parsons at least wasn't devious. "Christians like you shouldn't lie."

"I know I'm not helping you any, but I can at least be your friend. And I want to be."

"You're good to come such a long distance."

"I don't mind," replied Louise. "I ride the train to the Loop every day. I'm used to it."

"Will you come back next week?"

"Why - yes, if you want me to."

"We'll have a bite to eat at my place then. I'll show you some quilts I've made."

This seemed like progress. Louise prayed and wondered what her next move should be. Perhaps the Lord was saying, "You just stay in position, Louise. In time I'll reach her heart." If that was it, Louise was willing to stay in position.

On the way to Alice Parsons' flat the following week she bought a bunch of spring flowers. The old woman opened the door, looked at the green-wrapped package, and almost grabbed it.

"Flowers!"

"Yes," Louise explained. "They looked so pretty, and . . ."

"Flowers for me!" Her laugh was hard and short.

"With my love," said Louise.

"Come inside. You're a funny one, Mrs. Hall."

"Thank you," Louise laughed. "Am I?"

"You and your daughter must laugh together a lot, don't you?"

"Well, yes. But I think she's a lot more sensible than her mother?"

The woman was puzzled. "What do you mean by that?"

"Well, you see - Muriel's been a Christian since she was a child. She's grown up with JESUS CHRIST in her consciousness. I didn't. I grew up all pinched and bitter at life. I hated even the mention of GOD."

Alice Parsons' face hardened. "So do I!"

There was a silence. Louise broke it. "Don't you want to open the flowers?"

"Oh! Why - yes, I do."

She unwrapped the package and began arranging the blossoms in a pitcher. There was skill and taste in the way she worked with them.

"Hm - they're nice. Much obliged to you."

"You're a wonderful housekeeper, Mrs. Parsons," Louise said.

"Why don't you call me Alice? Am I too old?"

"No - and anyway, I don't know how old you are."

"That's true, and it's none of your business - but I'm sixty-seven. I know I look older. You don't have to tell me."

"Actually, your age would be hard to guess."

"I'm a hard woman, Mrs. Hall."

"Call me Louise. I want us to be friends."

"Why?"

"Because I want you to trust me. You're unhappy, and I'd like to help you turn over your entire life to JESUS CHRIST as I did."

"Oh! These flowers'll need water. Excuse me."

Alice's defenses were up again, but Louise was getting used to sudden changes of mood. When they sat down to dinner, the best napkins and china and carefully trimmed party radishes all showed how much of an occasion it really was. Louise tried another opening.

"Are there any members of your family still living?"

"I don't think I need to answer that."

"No," said Louise. "Of course you don't. Have you heard from your husband lately?"

"I must have been awfully talkative last time we were together. I didn't aim to talk about him."

"Aren't we friends, Alice? Why slam doors in my face?"

"Just don't like to have people nosin' into my life. I warned you I'm a rude old woman. Told you that in my first letter. I oughtn't to have written it at all!"

Louise said, "I'm not nosing, Alice. I'm just concerned about you."

"Care for some more salad?"

"Yes. I hope you'll make it again for me sometime." Alice Parsons served it carefully before she spoke. "With me so snippy, I don't expect you'll be back again."

"I will be if you'll invite me."

Mrs. Parsons hesitated. Then, "I'm sorry I cut you off. There's nothing to hide about my husband. He's a hopeless case, they say - at the veterans' hospital."

"I'm sorry."

"I believe you are. And I've no call to be snippy. Seems like I get worse every year. It just looks like I'm so touchy!"

She thought at length, trying to reach some sort of decision.

"Louise?"

"Yes, Alice?"

Another long pause. Then she spoke with a rush. "Do you think a person could damn another person's soul to Hell?"

This was the last question Louise had expected.

"In your story on the radio. You lost your temper at your boss, remember? And you told him where to go! They didn't say it in so many words on the radio, but that's what really happened, isn't it? You did condemn his soul to eternal damnation, didn't you? Isn't that just what happened?"

Louise was amazed. She said slowly, "Yes, it is. The words I really used were too bad to use on the radio. But why is that so important to you?"

It's not easy to watch the floodgates open up on years of pent-up guilt. The next half hour was a difficult one for Louise, but she was learning why she'd been remaining in position all these months. Alice told what it was that had made her a hard appearing, inwardly frightened woman. It was the thing that had made her respond to Louise's story.

Sometimes very simple guilts cause tremendous grief.

Alice Parsons had been orphaned as a young girl. An uncle took her in to work as his housemaid. He was a brutal man and treated her miserably. On the day she finally left his house, raging with anger, she had clearly and profanely condemned his soul to Hell!

When Alice finished telling the story, she was weeping. "That was forty-five years ago. He's been dead for twenty years now. And every single day of all those years I've been afraid! I'm afraid to die! I'm afraid I'll find him there in Hell!"

Louise said softly, "I'm glad you've finally told me."

"You know what I'm talking about," the woman sobbed.

"You did it, too!"

"Yes, Alice. But when we place our wicked lives in the hands of JESUS CHRIST - He forgives us and changes us. He forgets our sins, puts them behind Him. The Bible says so: "Don't talk to me about GOD and the Bible!"

"Alice, listen. You couldn't send your uncle to 'Eternal damnation,' as you say. Each man is responsible for his own soul. And JESUS wants to forgive you!"

Alice Parsons was calmer when they parted that night, but apparently only because of human sympathy. She seemed to remain stubbornly separated from CHRIST.

A few weeks later Louise learned the woman was in a hospital, very ill with cancer. During the long hospitalization, Louise called on her again and again. Each time she found Alice bitter with fear and self-hatred, and always in pain.

Louise was still willing to "remain in position" for the Lord to use her when He saw fit. She and her daughter prayed that He might show them how.

As so often happens, the call came when she was least ready to respond. She was in the midst of painting and decorating her new apartment. The night was hot. She was perched on a ladder and holding a dripping paint brush when the telephone rang. It was Muriel, her daughter.

"Mother - I'm calling from the old apartment. I guess you'd better draw on all the love you know, because the hospital just called. They want you to come right away."

"Oh-no!" Louise waved her arm emphatically. A shower of paint from the wet brush spattered the wall.

"It's Mrs. Parsons," Muriel said. "She's probably dying."

Two hours later, paint-free and neatly dressed, Louise Hall sat in the dimly lighted hospital room on the other side of town. Alice Parsons' eyes were closed. Her breathing was heavy and painful